

QUESTION AND ANSWER: OBSERVATION IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

by Kay Baker

In this article, Kay Baker sets out to answer the questions, “What is observation? What is the nature of observation in the elementary class? How can observation help the adult guide the development of children?” She responds by listing the areas that can be observed in the elementary class (the prepared environment, the work of the adult, the work of the child, the society created by this group, outside explorations in the large society), and discussing what observations can be made in each of those areas. She concludes with a lovely summary of what it means to be a guide to the child.

QUESTION. Observation is the foundation of the scientific pedagogy proposed by Dr. Maria Montessori. What is observation? What is the nature of observation in the elementary class? How can observation help the adult guide the development of children?

ANSWER. Observation is the act of noting and recording facts or events, as for some scientific study. To observe is to examine and study scientifically. The scientific study undertaken by Dr. Maria Montessori was an examination of the normal path of development of the human being. The development of the human being extends

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beyond childhood (birth to puberty) but this answer will be limited to childhood and in particular to the second stage of development. To this end, Montessori proposes that the child be left free to reveal this normal path of development. Yet being a child requires the care of the adult and so there is a presupposition that the adult provides care for the child in the process.

Therefore, one can identify two purposes for observation: 1) noting and recording events that lead one to describe a normal path of development, and 2) noting and recording events that lead one to provide the care necessary for normal development. In this response, the second purpose will be the primary focus. The description of a normal path of development as explicated by Maria Montessori will be the theory within which observations in the classroom will be discussed. It is instructive to include some foundational ideas in the Montessori theory.

Briefly, Montessori's theory regarding normal development is based on human tendencies, those strong urges that impel a human being to activity in the interest of survival and fulfillment of the human potential. Further, these strong urges are manifest to a greater degree at certain times during development so that the individual personality has the best chance of fulfilling the human potential. The most important aspect of observing normal development is that the human being must be left free to be active so that the normal path the human tendencies will take is revealed.

There is another important part of the theory for the child in the second stage of childhood. Just as the plan for the child in the first stage is to guide the child as he adapts to his immediate surroundings, the plan for the child in the second state is to guide the child to adapt to the universe. This plan is called Cosmic Education.

The work of the child is observed in both the context of the child as working toward adapting to the social world of humanity and the child as working to develop individual potential. Both are necessary for the full adaptation of the child. Without these observations, the child is left free but abandoned for the task of self-construction, and there will not be a strong and stable foundation for the next stage of development.

With this background theory as a general guide to observation, recalling the second purpose—noting and recording events that lead the adult to proper guidance of the child—we ask the question “What can be observed in the elementary classroom?”

- The prepared environment
- The work of the adult
- The work of the child
- The society created by this group, adults and children
- Outside explorations in the large society

Next, what are the observations to be made for each of these areas and how do these observations lead to proper guidance?

PREPARED ENVIRONMENT

The prepared environment needs to be observed for its suitability and its accessibility. Suitability means that the environment is complete as to its purpose and in good repair. Completeness means that all the materials needed for Cosmic Education are present and materials not needed for Cosmic Education are absent. In good repair means that the materials are clean, not broken, have all parts, and thus have the potential to fulfill their purpose. Accessibility means that the materials are arranged in a sensible manner. Materials are grouped by subject and can be gathered by the child without needing to ask for help or permission. Each item is visible as an entity and not mixed up with other items.

Observations regarding suitability of the environment may be done without the children present. Observe whether the room is an invitation to activity. Is there a supply shelf with a variety of items to use for explorations, i.e., great work? Are all items present and ready to use? With regard to accessibility, are the materials arranged by subject area and reasonably grouped so that the child is not confused about where to find what is needed? It is necessary to observe further for accessibility when the children are present. Can children find what they need and thus have the possibility to

be active in the environment? Is there enough space? Is there a place where they can go to reflect? Is the environment comfortable for the hours that the child is in the classroom?

How do these observations help the guidance of the child? A well prepared environment gives both the child and the adult the means to achieve a Cosmic Education. Otherwise, the adult cannot give presentations and the child cannot explore the concepts or activities thus presented. If the environment is not prepared for the child's freely chosen activity, there is no reason to suppose that the child can develop normally.

WORK OF THE ADULT

Observations regarding the work of the adult are primarily self-monitoring. They consist of observations regarding planning, presenting, recording, guiding, and analyzing. Analyzing leads back to planning. Planning is done for the year, seasonally, and weekly. Presenting is done daily, both from a plan and as needed by the children. Recording is accomplished as the interaction with the child is completed. Analysis and assessment are the judgment of the adult with regard to where to go next with the child. Another important aspect of the work of the adult is to set the protocols within which the children and the adult can be free. Although it seems that much of the work of the adult is directed to the whole class, it is important to be mindful in the analyzing stage that guidance for development is to be directed to the individual child. Observations are, of course, the basis of gathering the information that is passed on to the parents/guardians of the child.

Observations regarding the work of the adult are a reflection on the preparation and activities of the adult in the classroom. Is there a commitment to the work that leads to the child's activity? Is there a plan and is the plan reviewed and revised depending on the development of the child? Are the presentations well known to the adult? If not, what needs to be done so that the child receives the full benefit of all parts of Cosmic Education? Are records simple yet comprehensive so that they can be easily analyzed and assessed? Do records give guidance for future planning? Are classroom protocols working so that all are free to be active?

These observations help the guidance of the child because they ensure that Cosmic Education is conveyed to every child, i.e., as much as possible. Memory is not a reliable source to ensure this. In addition, it is necessary to ensure that a proper psychological environment is prepared so that children can self-construct.

WORK OF THE CHILD

Observations of the work of the child may be considered a primary focus. It is the child towards whom our attention is directed. Is this child following a normal path of development? Is this child thriving in the prepared environment? Does this child respond to the guidance of the adult? Is this child growing in responsibility? Is this child aware of peers and able to work collaboratively?

Observations of the work of the child are done in two ways. First, the adult observes the class and children as a whole. The adult steps aside from interacting with the children and observes the class. There are several areas to observe and the adult may observe them in rotation. What is the general ambiance of the class? Is there a hum of work or a different kind of hum? How many children are working with materials? How many children are working collaboratively? How many children are working collaboratively with materials? How many children are working side by side? How many children



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are working alone? How many children are planning what they are going to do? Are the children conversing about work or other social matters? How many children are in the process of making a choice? How many children are helping a classmate?

Second, the adult observes the children while the adult is working with the children. During a presentation, the adult observes the attitude of the child, the engagement of the child, the child's responses, the child's ability to verbalize, and the child's exploration of the concept or activity. During the three-period lesson associated with the presentation, the adult notes where the child falls in the continuum. Does the child need a representation? Does the child need further exploration to clarify the idea? Does the child demonstrate the acquisition of the concept/skill and need to move on? The observations of the child during presentations and subsequent follow-up are essential to guiding the individual child. Observations are also undertaken for the individual child during conferences. How aware is the child of the need to explore independently of the adult? How aware is the child of seeking help or giving help? What questions does the child have? What interests does the child express? How aware is the child of what he does and does not yet know? In interactions with the child during conferences, both the child and the adult have an opportunity to refocus and improve the work of the child and the work of the adult.

To reiterate, the work of the child is observed in both the context of the child as working toward adapting to the social world of humanity and the child as working to develop individual potential. Both are necessary for the full adaptation of the child. Without these observations, the child is left free but abandoned for the task of self-construction, and there will not be a strong and stable foundation for the next stage of development.

THE SOCIETY CREATED BY THIS GROUP, ADULTS AND CHILDREN

Observations of the society formed by the group give the adult information on how the individual activity of the child fits into the activities of society. While individual development is the focus, it is also important to recognize that individual development cannot occur without the assistance of society. Recognizing the need for others leads to the individual to develop an appreciation of others

and engenders responsibility toward others. These observations thus are important because the development of the child at this stage culminates in the child's awareness of a place in society. It is the foundation upon which the organized activities of human beings rest.

Observations of this aspect are also done in two ways: 1) stepping aside from the class and 2) observing while interacting with the child. How are the protocols set by the adult working to create a society within which all individuals are free to be active? What protocols do the children set for themselves as they go about their daily activity? After the initial burst of tattle telling in order to find out the good versus the bad, are the children able to negotiate amongst themselves solutions to social questions? Do children improve in their ability to negotiate as they age? Do they become aware that there are different avenues to be explored in the negotiating process? Do they develop a sense of values that steer them to a decision that is respectful of others? In the process of giving presentations to small groups of children, how aware is each child of the others in the group? Is the child patient while waiting for a turn? Does the child listen to others and make appropriate responses that make known he has listened?

These societal observations have great potential for the moral development of the child. It is at this stage of development that the child is open to possibility and needs guidance on what will lead to harmony within society.

OUTSIDE EXPLORATIONS IN THE LARGER SOCIETY

The child is being prepared by Cosmic Education to participate in the larger world outside the classroom. One can ask "What is the purpose of Cosmic Education?" Maria Montessori claims that the individual is preparing to take a place in society and to lead the human species to a unified humanity wherein cosmic harmony prevails. In order to accomplish this purpose, the child must explore outside the classroom. There is no other way to guide the child to realize that the mind must guide the body. These activities are a preparation for the next stage of development when the adult loses his guiding capacity to some extent and the emerging adult/adolescent must use his knowledge and independent judgment to live well.

For this purpose, observations here are focused on the activity of Going-Out. These activities are set in motion by the prepared environment. The prepared environment is limited so that the child, whose questions are innumerable, cannot find the answers. The child is led to realize that answers are possible through further exploration outside the classroom. How does the child respond to protocols set in the society of the classroom? Does the child explore to the point where further unanswered questions arise? If so, then the child is ready to Go Out and find the answers. The preparation for Going-Out involves the following observations. How does the child respond to the protocols for exploring outside the classroom? Is the child able to verbalize what is to be explored? Is the child able to use appropriate means to contact sources? Is the child able to collect data and compile what has been found? Is the child able to express appreciation for the information collected.

Observations of the child's ability to function independently and with sound choices outside of the immediate supervision of the adult are a barometer of an effective self-construction.

SUMMARY

To observe is to serve the child in the process of development. First learn all you can about the child. Prepare an environment in which the child can be free to act according to his inner directives. Help the child to know about the importance of activity for the human being. Observe the child as he acts in the environment. Revise as necessary. In this way, you are a guide for the child.

